

# DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE NEWS

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## Everyone Wins in the Downtown Retail Challenge

By Asia Frey

Holiday shopping didn't always mean battling tense crowds for deeply discounted electronics, waking before sunrise on "Black Friday" to line up for the same gifts as everyone else. In years gone by, downtown was where you went to shop, and, for a shopping experience that is pleasant, civilized, and even fun, downtown should be where people turn once again.

Today's vibrant downtown retail scene makes it possible to park and stroll, from one local merchant to the next, selecting thoughtful, unusual gifts for everyone on your list while enjoying dazzling holiday decorations and a breath of fresh air, literally and figuratively. Consider it your Downtown Retail Challenge- to check off everyone on your gift list with a gift from a downtown store. You might be surprised what an easy and fun challenge this will be.

The *Inside Up Boutique* on Bienville Square is a prime destination for women's and children's gifts, with its eclectic mix of home accents, apparel, jewelry and books. Perfect for a girlfriend who has everything, you could easily check off the female side of your shopping list in a single stop at this well-curated shop.

But one-stop shopping takes the fun out of your downtown spree, and a tour of the many art galleries is an absolute must. From smaller items such

as jewelry and accessories to a well-chosen investment in a work of art, *The Cathedral Square Gallery* is a co-op of over 60 artists and a long-time stalwart on the downtown arts scene, while the newest co-op the *Kangal Gallery in the Sail Loft* demands a visit. Add to that the contemporary *Host Gallery*, *Artology Gallery and Gifts*, the *Edwards Glass Studio*, *Entre Arts*, *Room 1927* and the 3,000 square foot *Robertson Gallery*, and you have on your hands the desirable problem of choosing from a



The *Host Gallery* features contemporary artists in a variety of media, from painting to ceramics to jewelry

truly dazzling array of one-of-a-kind art. You can also feather a friend's funky nest with unique finds at *Papillon*, home of vintage and fun stuff.

With the unparalleled selection at the gift shops in downtown's many museums, you can combine shopping with civic duty, and support culture while racking up presents for the previously hard to buy for. The beautiful *Portier House* has its own gift shop, while the *Southern Market in the Museum of Mobile* has items with a local and historical emphasis, and you can impress history enthusiasts with unusual finds they didn't even know they were missing. Educational toys from the *Explorem's Exploration Station* speak to a wide range of ages and interests. And also for the children on your list, *Attractions Children's Apparel* is chock full of fancy frocks for the well turned out tot.

Of course, a gift certificate for services at one of the several fine salons and spas downtown is always just the right size. The *Malaysack Studio* is an Aveda concept salon, a full service hair salon with spa services. *Geometrix Salon and Day Spa* also offers self-improving delights, while a trip to the magnificent *Spa at the Battle House* is a feast for all the senses. Shopping at any one of these oases may well turn into a much needed afternoon visit for the shopper herself, and so much the better.

*Bienville Books* boasts a selection of locally relevant titles that highlights its location in historic downtown, and you can round out your holiday shopping list here with adult and children's books, new or used. This fanciful book boutique also has a selection of gifts and a *Haunted Book Loft*. A personalized stamp or seal from the historic *M & A Stamp* makes a thoughtful addition to the perfect book.

Around here, the *Mardi Gras* enthusiast exists as its own category of gift recipient, and several destinations are available to satisfy this masked man or woman. *Mardi Gras &*



*Bienville Books* has thousands of titles in stock and can special order used, rare, or current best sellers

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# Director's Letter

## The Intersection of Vision and Reality

This issue of **Downtown Alliance News** features two matters important to the success of Downtown Mobile – the nurturing of retail growth and the recommendations for a more livable city shared with us by Andres Duany at the September annual meeting of the Alliance. (The speech can be watched on our website – [www.downtownmobile.org](http://www.downtownmobile.org).) We believe that the two matters absolutely go hand-in-hand. Everything we do at the Downtown Mobile Alliance is focused on making Downtown Mobile an exciting place to work, play or live. We start with the basics – cleanliness. Everyday our crews set out at 7 a.m. to collect litter, leaves, excrement and the other detritus of urban life. It ain't pretty, but it has to be done if we are to expect anybody who has a **choice** to come to Downtown Mobile. Some people do not get this. They get caught up in the notion that somebody else should do this cleaning. We tried that for 300 years and it did not work very well. A few people cleaned their sidewalk, the rest waited for the magic fairies to clean things up. The customers went elsewhere.

Next we work on the environment. Andres talked about the importance of lighting to a nighttime dining and residential scene. People do not want their dates to look like aliens, he said. The type of light bulb used is important. In downtown, the city switched to a metal halide bulb and a pedestrian scale light true to the period of historical importance for the Lower Dauphin Street Historic District (which is much bigger than Dauphin Street, BTW.) When the city first began installing these pedestrian scale light fixtures in 1994 there were 4 restaurants open at night downtown. Now after the installation of more than 300 pedestrian scaled light fixtures with metal halide light bulbs (that make your date look good) there are 27 restaurants open at night in Downtown Mobile. It is a little thing that no one notices, but so are most of the design elements that go into the making of a successful commercial center.

American Express recently published an article entitled, “**5 Ways to Lure Local Shoppers.**” The first of which is “Create a better place.” There are many, many players important to the task of creating a better place in the public realm of downtown. The Alliance is just one of them. Others include the city government, property owners, event promoters, ALDOT, and tenants. Each shop or eatery must work to create a better place inside their business. I challenge each one of our readers to walk in your store/restaurant/office like a customer does and ask yourself, “What is special about this place that will compel a customer to come here once, twice, three times?” A successful long term strategy involves continually surpassing your customer's expectations. There is a lot of noise out there and most shoppers/diners are overwhelmed with personal and/or work issues. Your job while they are in your store is to give them a spectacular experience.

I read recently where Danny Meyer, purveyor of several acclaimed NYC restaurants, can look at his customers across his restaurant and tell if they are getting good service. If they are engaged in conversation things are fine; if they are looking around the service is slow. How true is this? How many of us have been engaged in a conversation only to have a poorly trained server come up and ask how things are? Likewise, how many times have you been out of your beverage or in need of service and looking around, aggressively seeking the attention of the server you haven't seen in 10 minutes? For me, this has been more times than I care to remember.

We have a delightful collection of new retailers to go along with the long serving retailers and service providers we all know and love. I challenge each of you to visit these businesses. Give them the opportunity to exceed your expectations. If they do not, let them know how they can do better. I promise you these shop-owners and restaurateurs care about their customers.

Likewise, let us know how we can improve the public realm. What is most important to you? More events? No garbage cans? Festive seasonal lighting? More flowers? Tell us. We want to know. This is a journey of ever greater improvements. What we did last year is not good

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# Incubator Designed to Spur Retail Growth

By Carol Hunter

As is clear from our cover story, Downtown Mobile has a great variety and number of retail outlets, but we still lack the critical mass of stores necessary for us to become a true shopping destination. Over the years we have worked to recruit dozens of start-up and small retailers only to hear repeatedly that they need to make a small entrance into the marketplace.

With those concerns in mind, the Downtown Mobile Alliance has created a package of incentive programs to spur retail development. The first two, a retail forgivable loan and a signage grant have been in place for a few months and are seeing results (to learn more about these programs, visit [www.downtownmobile.org](http://www.downtownmobile.org)). The newest incentive is a retail incubator, designed to attract new and existing regional retailers who would like to experience a downtown location without the full startup costs of a standalone store and the investment risk that an independent store in a new location entails.

Our plan is to create The Shops at LoDa, a large, open space divided into smaller areas for individual retailers. A lease has been negotiated with a local property owner to house the incubator in a prime Dauphin Street location. The incubator will provide staffing, a point-of-sale computer system, utilities, maintenance, phone and internet, charge card processing and the ongoing oversight and training of a retail consultant. Since the tenant is only responsible for rent (estimated at \$1650/month), inventory, merchandising, and any additional staffing and marketing, many of the expenses and difficulties of running a retail operation have

## Shopping Downtown Makes Sense for the Local Economy Citywide

When shopping downtown, consider the economics behind the 3/50 Project, an initiative to encourage people to spend their money in locally owned businesses. For every \$100 spent in independently owned stores, \$68 returns to the community through taxes, payroll, and other expenditures. If you spend that in a national chain, only \$43 stays in the community. If you shop online, the number drops to zero.

Shopping downtown is not just fun for you and good for your lucky gift recipients; it's good for the entire community.



*The Garden Party is a new downtown shop featuring live plants, cut flowers and garden accessories that is taking advantage of our retail incentives*

been eliminated. Add to that the fact that the lease is only for six months, and much of the risk has also been removed.

The Alliance has applied for several grants to launch the incubator and has so far been awarded \$10,000 from the Sybil H. Smith Charitable Trust. Once our target of \$56,000 has been raised, the incubator will be in business, and so will several new retailers in Downtown Mobile!

If you would like to learn more about The Shops at LoDa Retail Incubator, please contact Fred Rendfrey at 251-434-8498 or [fred@downtownmobile.org](mailto:fred@downtownmobile.org), or Denise Browning at 251-434-8498 or [db@hunterventures.net](mailto:db@hunterventures.net).

The lack of traditional population demographics necessary to draw regional and national retailers has made retail recruitment extremely difficult. However, we do have significant traffic passing through. The downtown Mobile traffic statistics include:

- 22,000 people work in downtown Mobile daily
- 73,000 cars per day drive by downtown Mobile along Interstate 10
- 2 million visitors come to Mobile annually

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enough for this year. Remember our vision for 2015 is of a Downtown Mobile that:

- Has active street level uses;
- Is walkable day and night;
- Is a place where women, children and pets feel comfortable to use the area daily;
- Is alive during the business week and the weekend;
- Has increased residential opportunities for all incomes;
- Is better connected to the waterfront.

There is plenty to do to get to this vision, but thanks to many investors, both public and private, Downtown Mobile is well on its way. Please stay involved and continue to demand an ever better place for yourself, your customers, your family, and your visitors.

Sources: [www.openforum.com](http://www.openforum.com)

— Elizabeth Sanders

# After Andres Duany – Next Steps for Downtown Mobile

The 2010 annual meeting of the Downtown Mobile District Management Corporation was a rousing success on many levels. Attendance was an all time high, keynote speaker Andres Duany brought international stature to the event and a series of smaller meetings before the luncheon helped pave the way for a new way of thinking about development in Mobile. But where do we go from here? How can we move toward the vision we all have for our city, especially our downtown?

It's worth recalling some of Duany's remarks from September and considering how true they are for us in the Port City:

- The current financial crisis is related to the car-dependent lifestyle of the American middle class. We've created a nation that can't get itself fed, educated or even entertained without a car.
- So much of the money once spent on the entire public realm (public buildings, parks, schools, etc.) now goes only to roads, which means we have reallocated public and private wealth to supporting cars. Money that used to be spent on beautiful public buildings now goes to highways. This is why our schools look like insecticide factories and our fire stations are Butler buildings.
- 70-80 percent of our city is suburban sprawl, which is unsustainable. In pursuit of accommodating cars, we made walking impossible, which totally isolates the old and the young. Think about your own neighborhood...do you have sidewalks, and if you do, are they well-maintained? If you actually wanted to walk or bike somewhere from your house, could you do so safely?
- Mobile's future depends on getting downtown working on all cylinders right away. The friction between government and developers must be removed. Successful cities are removing bloated regulations.

Through the creation and implementation of SmartCode concepts for development, Duany and other New Urban visionaries have supplied the framework for more sustainable, walkable and desirable communities, the kinds of communities that work as well for pedestrians as they do for cars. This matters because no one ever decided to move to a place thinking, "My car will be happy here!" We look for cities that feel real and human, not places that look the same in every city in every state across the nation and require a car trip for basic necessities. This is especially true of the millennial generation, those whose skills and talents are being courted by every successful city in the country.

By adopting SmartCode for Downtown Mobile, we will be able to more easily create the kind of environment that will attract new businesses, residents and visitors, but it could be a challenging process since the concept is a new one for most of us. Currently, development in Mobile is governed by a hodge-podge of regulations: zoning, building codes, and fire and safety codes. These regulations have contributed to urban sprawl and neighborhoods isolated from shopping, businesses and each other. SmartCode has at its core the opposite basic principle: cities should be structured as a series of walkable neighborhoods, which requires a mix of land uses (residential, office and retail), public spaces with a sense of enclosure to create "outdoor rooms" and pedestrian-oriented transportation design.

In the simplest of terms, SmartCode focuses on form, not land use. Form-based zoning regulates land development with the most emphasis on



*Most of Dauphin Street is a great example of SmartCode development, which creates walkable communities with buildings close to the sidewalks*

controlling urban form and less emphasis on controlling land uses (although uses with negative impacts, such as heavy industry, adult businesses, etc. are still regulated). Urban form features regulated under the SmartCode include the width of lots, size of blocks, building setbacks, building heights, placement of buildings on the lot, location of parking, etc. Communities decide how a city or neighborhood should look and function, and then calibrate SmartCode to achieve that vision.

The next step in the process is to involve stakeholders in early discussions. City officials and planning staff, developers, property owners and residents should all have an opportunity to contribute to the development of a SmartCode for downtown. A visit to Montgomery can prove extremely helpful in understanding how SmartCode works in practice. That city recently adopted SmartCode as a parallel option for developers, but it became so popular that it now replaces the old zoning/building code regulations. Charrettes, conducted over a several-day period, are a crucial step and will help create the roadmap for future growth. Finally, the city will adopt a SmartCode policy that will provide developers with the tools they'll need to create a walkable, sustainable, economically competitive downtown.

To learn more about SmartCode, visit these websites: [www.smartcodecomplete.com](http://www.smartcodecomplete.com), [www.smartcodecentral.org](http://www.smartcodecentral.org), or [www.dpz.com](http://www.dpz.com).

# Weaving the Fabric

By Asia Frey

A closer look at the people, businesses and non-profit organizations that call downtown home.

## Bellwether Group

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The Bellwether Group is a Mobile-based marketing, advertising, public relations and event planning firm. Their community and media relations programs, along with their marketing and branding projects have received regional and national recognition. President and owner Kinnon Phillips explains why his downtown is such a big part of his business, and his life.



**You were the very first person to join the Downtown Alliance- why?** Really? I had no idea. I have many memories of downtown growing up. My great aunt used to take me downtown on Saturdays – we would ride the bus, go to the Kress counter for lunch and she would stop in Gayfers. In high school, I worked downtown after school, and often walked around daydreaming about what downtown could become. When I returned to Mobile after college, I saw the first small movement of change and became involved in Main Street and became friends with Elizabeth (Sanders). I was there for the beginning of the farmers' market, got involved in the first year of Bayfest and other initiatives. So, it was natural for me to join up with the DMA when they opened their doors.

**What does the downtown location of your business mean to you?** My office is a respite, with lots of windows and in a historic townhouse – perfect for my line of business. Of course I can walk everywhere, eat at a variety of local restaurants and live only a mile away.

**How do you envision Downtown Mobile getting even better for business in the future?** As an incubator, and innovator and increasingly an organization that brings together all stakeholders downtown to push all of us to expect more. Many say "downtown is wonderful, what a great place it has become." The view is more than that, the DMA is a catalyst for an ever more vibrant downtown.



## Leilah Mehriary

Leilah lives and works downtown, and explains how, as a relative newcomer, her Dauphin Street Apartment has been her gateway to an exciting life in Mobile.

**Why did you decide to move downtown?** It is very convenient to my job and being new in the area it allowed me to easily meet people. Also I can walk to all the events and restaurants, there is never a dull moment and I enjoy people watching. Haven't had cable in 3 plus years and you really don't need it if you live downtown.

**How long have you lived here?** 2 1/2 years

**What's your favorite thing about living downtown?** I like being able to walk to the farmers' market and being so close to all the Mardi Gras fun!

## Greater Mobile Development Corporation

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Teresa Sands, Executive Director of the Greater Mobile Development Corporation, talks about the role of downtown in the big picture of developing business in Mobile, which is the task of the non-profit organization which she helms.

**Your non-profit exists to help grow businesses. Can you highlight what your role has been downtown?** The Greater Mobile Development Corporation has helped many small businesses in the downtown area since we were first formed in 1993.

**Why do you think it's important to be involved with downtown and the Downtown Alliance?** The GMDC believes that a strong and vibrant downtown is vital to the success of an area for attracting small businesses and any new businesses.

**What have been the most positive changes you've seen downtown, and what do you look forward to in the future?** The most positive changes to the downtown area have been the introduction of homes, apartments and other businesses to keep people in the downtown area after the working people have gone home. The future of the downtown area depends on getting more people to live and work in the downtown area, to keep vital businesses in the area and to attract more grocery stores, dry cleaners, etc. for the people who live down there to want to stay.

## Remembering Ruben

For nine years the parks and sidewalks of Mobile were patrolled by a great beast that came to be known as the "Mayor of Downtown." Ruben, the massive Great Dane owned by Teddy Lee, ruled his domain with a gentle temperament and firm tail. He was known to virtually everyone who lived, worked or regularly visited downtown and became such a fixture that Alabama's Poet Laureate, Sue Walker, and noted artist, Kate Seawell, published a book about his exploits, *Ruben's Mobile*. Nine years is a long life for a Great Dane, and Ruben quietly left us a few weeks ago. Downtown is not the same without him, but we hope one day Teddy will be ready to introduce another four-legged companion to the wonderful life of an urban canine.



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More sells gifts and souvenirs while *Toomey's Carnival Museum Gift Shop* is the authority on everything Mardi Gras. *Olensky Brothers Office and School Supply* might surprise you with its selection of toys and gifts, in addition to its wide stock of more practical office items.

The menfolk need not be left out in a downtown shopping spree. Both *Naman's Department Store* and *New York Hi Style* boast a colorful variety of men's apparel and accessories, while *Weber's Department Store* has been outfitting the entire family for years. Save yourself a trip to one of those congested home improvement warehouses with the well-stocked *Handyman's Railroad Salvage*, which carries a full selection of tools and necessities for the gentleman who already is or desires to become handy around the house.

Top things off with a selection of stocking stuffers from downtown's candy legends, the *A & M Peanut Shop* and *Three Georges Southern Chocolates*. Both shops offer a splendid array of old-fashioned treats that you can't find in the standard grocery store, which helps give that authentic, direct-from-Santa's-workshop flair to your carefully stocked stockings. Baked goods from *Pollman's* would be a welcome addition, too. And at the end of a long day, don't forget to grab some gourmet prepared foods to go from *The Market at 219*.

Accept the downtown retail challenge, and see what a pleasure shopping from local downtown merchants can be. The goods are all there; savvy shoppers and word of mouth can complete the picture of downtown as a retail destination.



*Three Georges Southern Chocolates is ready to satisfy everyone on your list who has a sweet tooth*